Fair Isn’t Always Equal Chapter Reflections

**Chapter 1**

The first chapter details all of the different ways that differentiation is used in the classroom. It really opened my eyes to things I didn’t even consider differentiation, such as extending deadlines or rephrasing questions to make them more understandable. To me, these things just seemed like common courtesy that teachers should afford their students. I can’t even imagine a situation in which a teacher didn’t employ any kind of differentiation in classes, but it is so easy to see how that would lead to fast failure from even the brightest students. The chapter also goes over a variety of possible counterarguments people might have towards differentiation, making it clear that those who would say it’s making it easier for the kids, not helping them at all, and making it harder for them to succeed in higher grade levels and the working world clearly do not understand exactly what differentiation means. It isn’t a crutch in the negative sense of the word, but more an aide, something that will help these students to succeed where they would not without the help. It’s not something for them to lean on, but a tool for them to use to get better and to be able to stand alone on their own two feet. On top of that, it also gave a few examples of careers and real world situations in which people use differentiation. These examples are important for aspiring teachers to be aware of as well, so they don’t second guess their methods, wondering if they really are hindering their students in the future, which is something I might be prone to worry about.

**Chapter 2**

This chapter talks about mastery based assessment versus effort based and why the former is more important. Effort based learning doesn’t prove that students know and are critically thinking about the material, and in many cases may prove that it’s okay if they *don’t* know the the material. For instance, many math teachers in my high school would grade homework based on effort rather than correctness. While it may seem that it’s taking some stress off of students, it’s also not correcting them when they’re wrong. Often times, these teachers would simply walk around the room, only checking to see whether or not the homework was done and nothing more. Then, when going over corrections, they either didn’t go over all the correct answers, assuming the students knew which answers were right and wrong. They would only address the homework if asked, and then would only go over specific questions they were asked about and not the whole assignment. This way of teaching many left me behind many times over because I would be getting wrong answers and not realizing it, or I would be too shy to speak up and would never get the help I need. If these teachers had been collecting the homework and going over it for errors, there would have been a better chance of them realizing I wasn’t understanding the material and would have given me the help I need. The same goes for summative assessments that are based on effort rather than knowledge and mastery. Just because a student puts in huge amounts of effort doesn’t mean they have an accurate grasp on the concepts and underlying ideals. So while it might seem harsher to actually grade based on mastery, it ultimately leads to a far more positive outcome.

**Chapter 3**

This chapter covered so much and, in my opinion, was super overwhelming. Its goal was to cover the principles of assessment, but I feel like it did way more than that. One of the biggest things I got out of this chapter, aside from all of the assessment talk, was that it is important for lessons and units to be fluid and changeable. Sometimes, things do not always go the way they are planned and it is imperative that teachers are flexible enough to work though these unexpected changes. For instance, I might have a lesson planned out, but upon getting to know my students, I realize that for many of them, the formative assessment I have planned is not challenging enough for some students and is too far ahead of the pacing for other students. Because of this, I would need to adjust the assessment to be perhaps a bit more open ended, allowing for both extremes to display their knowledge in a way better suited to their current content knowledge. I might have the excelling students add a layer to the assessment, in order to challenge them and encourage them to think about the material in a new way. For the slower paced students, I might be able to take off some layers, allowing them to focus on where they are currently in their content knowledge and preparing them for the next step without overwhelming them or asking them to go too far beyond their current content knowledge. By doing this, I am able to effectively alter my lesson plan to accommodate both student extremes, while still having a middle ground for those who are where I had anticipated most students would be when I was creating the lesson.

**Chapter 4**

This was a fairly short chapter that went over a few different methods of grading and assessment, namely student portfolios, a couple different kinds of rubrics, and student self-assessment. The book kind of made it seem like teachers should only use one of the three, but I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able to mix and match, especially when using student self-assessment. Portfolios are extremely useful when looking at students work as a whole. With portfolios, a teacher is able to see how students’ work has evolved over a period of time, and it is much easier to see where they have improved. It’s also very easy to add self-assessment onto that. Students can also look back on their work, see how they have improved, and comment on it. It can also give the teacher insight into where the student’s main focus was in their work, as the student would be more likely to comment on something they take personal pride in having improved.

Rubrics are also very useful, and I always preferred having a rubric to reference when working on a project. When done correctly, they give students insight into what the teacher is looking for out of the finished product. It gives students a clear understanding of what is expected and can guide them on the path to achieving it. Rubrics also easily allow a place for self-assessment. Students can assess where they think they’re score on each rubric point, and can then match it up with the teacher’s score.

It is even possible to use all three together. For example, in an English course, rubrics could be used for individual assignments, and then at the end of the semester/year, students could put together a final portfolio, which would include revised versions of each of their larger writing projects and a self-assessment requiring them to evaluate how they believe they have gotten stronger in their writing over the course of the class.

**Chapter 5**

This chapter deals with tiering different assignments for different levels of academic readiness. It suggests keeping the bare minimum for the standard in question as the lowest tier, raising the bar a bit for the middle/average tier, and raising the bar higher for the advanced tier. One of the biggest questions I have regarding tiering, though, is how do we tier things without singling people out? I think my struggle with this idea comes from the way my high school ran things, being that we had different ‘levels’ of courses, from 1-4. Level 1 classes were for those who were seriously struggling with a subject and needed a slow paced curriculum. Level 4, which eventually evolved into AP classes, were fast paced and challenging classes. Levels 2-3 were both average areas, where most students fell, with one being slightly slower than the other. So our teachers didn’t have to tier work and have three different tiers in one class, because the students in their class were already expected to have a pre-determined level of understanding. Those who fell behind would often realize that they were better suited to the next level down. And to me, this just seems like the fairest way to do things. No students are being singled out because they’re ‘below average’ and no students are treated as teacher’s pets or nerds for doing advanced work. The book, and this chapter especially, stress making school work understandable for all tier levels, but it leaves out the social aspect of all of these students in a single class together. Like, whether we like it or not, there will always be social implications to having work or doing a project that is below the average student level. From my experience, there’s less stigma from having different leveled classes already sorted out.

**Chapter 6**

This chapter discusses how to create meaningful test questions. Test questions should be easy to understand, with the teacher’s intentions being clear. Students shouldn’t have to worry about trick questions or trying to figure out what exactly a teacher is looking for. The point of tests is to assess students’ mastery, not to try and fail them on purpose with confusing questions. Each question needs to be meaningful and have an explicit purpose.

I really liked the idea of asking students to clarify why they chose a certain multiple choice answer, or clarifying a true/false question. I don’t know if it’s something I would want to do as a student, but from a teaching perspective, it’s definitely a good way to take note of a student's true level of understanding. With multiple choice questions, it is very easy for students to just guess and unknowingly pick the correct answer. Of course, doing this would require an interesting way of grading, because if a student got the question itself right but the explanation wrong, an argument could be made that they still got the question partially right. Maybe scoring for that could be something discussed with the class as a whole, so students are aware before hand what the point system would be for a situation like that.

Related to student awareness, I really liked how this chapter pushed making students aware of exactly what will be on the test, especially in terms of questions that might be trickier (such as having one that is impossible to answer). Honestly, I’m in favor of complete study guide, which help students know exactly what they should be studying and understanding, rather than letting them guess what they’ll need to understand.